

EXTRACTS FROM NOTES MADE WHILE IN NAVAL
SERVICE

BY W T. HELMUTH

In the fall of 1917 the ship on which I served as seaman was assigned to inspection duty on the Atlantic and Gulf coasts of the United States, under Rear-admiral C. McR. Winslow's flag. We left the navy yard at Brooklyn on October 20, 1917, and proceeded up the New England coast as far as Machiasport, Maine, which we reached on November first. We then journeyed south, close inshore, up the Delaware River to Philadelphia, thence to Norfolk, Va., arriving on Thanksgiving day. We left Norfolk on February 23, 1918, proceeding south to Key West, Fla. From here we went directly to Pensacola, Fla.; from Pensacola to New Orleans, up the south pass of the Mississippi; from New Orleans to Galveston, Texas; thence to Port Arthur, Texas, and across the Gulf of Mexico to Tampa, Fla., arriving on April 1, 1918. From Tampa our course took us again to Key West, up the east coast of Florida to Jacksonville, and thence north to Charleston, S. C., stopping at Brunswick and Savannah, Ga.

During this time I had excellent opportunities to study the birds met with offshore, and a few chances to watch land birds on our all too infrequent "liberties" in various places. Some of these notes may be of interest to readers of 'The Auk,' and I append them herewith.

My very sincere thanks are due to Mr. John Treadwell Nichols, of the American Museum of Natural History, who was kind enough to read the original, and perhaps too voluminous, notes, and whose suggestions have been invaluable in the separation of the wheat from the chaff.

I

NOTES FROM NEW ENGLAND COAST NORTH OF CAPE COD, AUTUMN
OF 1917.

Across Massachusetts Bay from Provincetown to Boston, late October. Boston toward Machiasport, Me., sixty-sixty-five miles offshore, October 31; to Machiasport and Bar Harbor, in-

shore, November 1; Bar Harbor to Rockland, Me., inshore, November 2; Rockland to Portland, Me., November 4.

Colymbus a. auritus. HORNED GREBE.—In the harbor of Machiasport, November 1, there were nearly 500. [This unusual concentration may indicate that the height of southward migration had reached this point on the coast. J. T. N.]

Alle alle. DOVEKIE.—Three Dovekies seen, Oct. 31, one of which we almost cut down. The wings of these little birds move incredibly fast, and they bear a certain resemblance to tiny Old Squaws in their manner of flight. Six observed on November 1.

November 4, off the Maine coast, my brother counted 83 Dovekies during his hour on the bow look-out, and 103 from the crow's-nest in an hour. We passed through scattered flocks of them all day. They rose before the bows in little flocks, flying to either side, usually for only a short distance before either dropping down into the water again or diving from the air. They flew low over the water for the most part.

Rissa t. tridactyla. KITTIWAKE.—Several flocks of about a dozen each, seen while crossing Massachusetts Bay, late October. Abundant offshore north of Boston and inshore north of Rockland. Common along coast from Rockland to Portland. [The abundance of this species on the Maine coast at this season would seem to indicate that it first moves southward inshore and then V's somewhat outward and also scatters directly outward across the ocean. J. T. N.]

Sula bassana. GANNET.—Going north several were seen crossing Massachusetts Bay. From Boston to Maine they were common, almost all adults, which may indicate that the adults move southward first.

Phalacrocorax carbo. CORMORANT.—On October 31, when well out at sea a large, ragged-looking cormorant was seen, which I identified as *carbo*. Three more of the same species were seen on November 1, in the early morning, far offshore.

Spinus pinus. PINE SISKIN.—On November 2, between Bar Harbor and Rockland, a flock of Siskins and another of Horned Larks came aboard lighting all over the rigging. Many large flocks of Siskins noted during the day, all going north. Mr. Nichols suggests that this northward migrational movement may be accounted for by the deeply-indented, broken coast line of Maine, affording many opportunities for migrational eddies of the type so often observed in similar regions.

II.

WATERFOWL IN THE VICINITY OF DELAWARE BAY, IN LATE NOVEMBER, 1917.

November 24, 1917. At anchor in lower Delaware Bay. Red-breasted Mergansers, Old Squaws, and Scoters in myriads, especially the first-named species. The birds were for the most part flying across the sandy

dunes at Cape Henlopen, or from the bay to the sea. Certain definite pathways seemed to be used by all species, and the birds flew to and from sea indifferently. Their activity continued throughout the day. Weather raw, cold and windy, with a brisk north-west wind blowing.

November 28. From League Island Navy Yard down Delaware River, en route to Norfolk, Va. Large flocks of Mallard, Black Duck and Brant seen along Delaware River. Fifty or sixty Baldpate, a small flock of Redhead, and one flock of fifteen Pintails noticed with the above. In lower Delaware Bay, near Cape Henlopen, at least five hundred Brant were seen. About twenty-five miles to sea, off Cape Henlopen, we ran into a tremendous bed of Scoters. All three species were present, but White-winged Scoters greatly predominating. There must have been at least 20,000 individuals in the flock, which rose in a solid mass, the air being so filled with birds that I fully expected some to fly through our deadlights!

III

BOUND SOUTH, FROM NORFOLK, VA., TO KEY WEST, FLA., FEB.
24 TO 27.

Larus leucopterus. ICELAND GULL.—February 24, 1918. Passed Hatteras at noon, eight miles off Diamond Shoals lightship. Weather cold; sea smooth at Hatteras, becoming lumpy off Cape Lookout and very heavy from there on. Strong wind from south-east. At 6:30 A. M. an Iceland Gull appeared, which followed us all day to a point approximately ninety miles off Cape Fear. Its pure white appearance was striking, and the bird looked distinctly smaller than the numerous Herring Gulls. Bill proportionately smaller, yellow with a slightly cloudy spot on the lower mandible. In some vague way the flight of this bird and its general appearance was quite different from the Herring Gulls. It never associated closely with the others, hanging on the edges of the always following flocks. Occasionally it rested on the water, and we often left it far behind, but it had no trouble in overtaking us, and continued to follow us all day.

Sula bassana. GANNET.—Very common off the capes of the Carolinas, on February 24, at a distance of from fifty to eighty miles offshore, both adults and immature; less common February 25, closer inshore, approaching Savannah, Georgia; extremely abundant in flocks of considerable size fifteen miles off St. Augustine, Fla., February 26; two seen close inshore not far from Palm Beach, February 27. [A sector across the Gannet's late winter range at the conclusion of an unusually severe season. J. T. N.]

Ardea herodias. GREAT BLUE HERON.—On February 25, when about twenty miles off the coast of southern Georgia, a Great Blue Heron, very nearly exhausted, was seen flying south, inshore of us. At intervals the tired bird would try to rest on the water, but upon sinking to its thighs

would resume its weary flapping again, always keeping low near the surface. For the frequency with which this species is met with at sea, nearly always in an exhausted condition, I am inclined to blame their habit, in the south, of feeding on the actual ocean beach, and of their custom of making an extended oversea flight when startled at their fishing. Under such circumstances it would be all too easy for so large a bird—and no very powerful flyer at that—to be blown out in a strong offshore gale.

Land Birds seen at sea. February 25, approaching Savannah, Ga., a Savannah Sparrow appropriately enough, spent a few hours on the boat deck. On February 27, when about six miles offshore near Palm Beach, Fla., a Ruby-throated Hummingbird flew over us and a Yellow-throat was with us all day; it was joined later by a Yellow-Palm Warbler, and these two caused much excitement among the crew, such "tropical looking birds" impressing them with how far south we had come! The presence of the Hummingbird seemed to me unusual at the time, and it seems as though the bird really had no business to be so far north at that time of year, though, as Mr. Nichols pointed out, this species is not uncommonly met with even at long distances from land.

IV

SOME FLORIDA NOTES, MARCH, 1918.

Gavia immer. LOON. March 18, a bed of over 200 seen in the harbor of Pensacola, all swimming in a compact body in one direction,—a novel sight.

Lobipes lobatus. NORTHERN PHALAROPE. March 14, about 175–180 miles off the Gulf coast of Florida, approximately opposite Tampa. Passed eight Northern Phalaropes at noon, and three more about two hours later.

Dendroica discolor. PRAIRIE WABLER. One of the commonest birds in the mangroves on the west end of Key West, Fla. Nichols speaks of this being a common mangrove bird on the west coast of Florida in April.¹

Early migration of land birds. At Warrington, Fla., near Pensacola, March 18, the thick, low growth along the swampy shore of a small lake was alive with warblers and other small birds, some of which were surely migrants. Nichols noticed no such migration further south in the Keys in 1917, until a much later date. Among others, the following species were seen: Red-eyed Vireo, one; Black and White Warbler, one; Parula Warbler, several; Cape May Warbler, two; Myrtle, Yellow-throated, and Pine Warblers, eight or ten of each. One Wood Thrush and three Blue-gray Gnatcatchers also seen, and a small flock of Carolina Chickadees.

At Hobe Sound, on the southeast coast of Florida, this spring (1919), I observed no movement of migrating warblers, (discounting the departure of winter residents there), at all comparable to this, until the first

¹Nicholls, J. T., 1918. Bird-notes from Florida; Abstr. Linn Soc., N. Y., No. 30.

week in April; the height of general migration occurring on April 27. No general movement of winter resident species even, was observed there until March 22 (1919), at a point much further south than Pensacola.

From the above it might be supposed that the migration on the north-western corner of the peninsula begins at a much earlier date than on the east coast, or even on the peninsula proper.

V

NOTES FROM MISSISSIPPI DELTA AND GULF OF MEXICO, LATE
MARCH.

March 22, 1918. Bird life on Mississippi Delta. Sailing from a point twenty miles south of South Pass, up the river to New Orleans. When about twelve miles from the Delta we encountered huge beds of Ring-billed and Herring Gulls, chiefly the former, resting on the already turbid and muddy water. This muddy water lay like a film of oil over the clear water below, and our passage separated the film, leaving a clear, limpid wake behind, over which the Herring, Laughing, and Ring-billed Gulls fairly swarmed, as well as several Pelicans and Royal Terns. As far as we could see were banks of gulls, like patches of snow on a muddy plain, and the Pelicans in the distance were beyond all estimation. Saw many Royal Terns and about twenty smaller terns, resembling the Common Tern in general appearance, but too far away to identify.

A flock of Redheads flew over the ship, and we saw several dozen Canvasbacks, which struck me as rather remarkable. Cormorants were abundant in small flocks of from five to eight near the entrance of the river. Saw a few Bonaparte's Gulls also.

As we entered the pass a flock of at least 2000 Pelicans rose from a sandy point beyond the breakwater with a tremendous flapping of wings, and hundreds of ducks started from the reeds on all sides whenever we blew our whistle. Royal Terns were common in large flocks here, as well as in the marshes, remaining so until the character of the country changed decidedly. Brown Pelicans were everywhere, flying along in big strings. These became less and less common as we ascended the river.

Throughout the delta, and for a considerable distance up the river (as far as Point l'Hache), the most evident and abundant land bird was the Boat-tailed Grackle. They were new birds to me and I was struck by their large size, their shrill piercing whistle, the difference between the two sexes, and, in short, their utter dissimilarity to our Purple Grackles. They were present everywhere on the lower river, in huge flocks mostly, but many scattered individuals were seen at the same time. With them were quantities of Red-winged Blackbirds, in scattered colonies.

In the marshes there were ducks by the thousand, and our whistle never failed to scare up a perfect cloud of them. Mallards, Shovelers, both Teal, and Pintail were the commonest species, named in order of abundance. The Pintail, though seen everywhere, were numerically less

common. Numerous Black Duck (sp.?) were seen, some Scaups, probably Lesser Scaups, one flock of about sixty Gadwalls, and three flocks of Baldpates. All these birds were either feeding or resting quietly in the shallow pools between the long strips and patches of high grass and reeds, and from the main-top I could look directly down upon them. It made a splendid sight, and even at the risk of exhausting the patience of the reader I cannot help describing the appearance of the scene as it seemed to an enthusiastic bird lover, to whom many of the species observed were new or unfamiliar.

From my elevated vantage point, the thousands of ducks first attracted attention, but almost immediately one noticed the long strings of flapping Pelicans, the noisy hosts of Grackles, and the bands of Laughing and Ring-billed Gulls that drifted over the marshes and wheeled in our wake, before one's eyes sought out the various other kinds of fowl not quite so obviously in evidence. In the pools were countless Herons, chiefly Little Blues, Louisianas, and Great-Blues, with an occasional Egret. Nearly every pool sheltered eight or nine "assorted Herons," including now and then Night Herons of both species. There were beds of Coots in the larger pools, and sometimes a Pied-billed Grebe or two. In one pool was a flock of some fifteen Greater Yellowlegs. Four Lesser Yellowlegs, some Dowitchers, and many Least or Semipalmated Sandpipers were seen here and there. Hudsonian Curlew were at times not uncommon, and we saw several flocks on the wing.

Small Terns were occasionally seen, perhaps Foster's, three of which flew by uttering harsh rattling cackles and some shrill peeping notes, unlike any of the varied notes of the Common Tern. Large Terns were common, but whether Royal or Caspian I could not tell. Once we passed three great White Pelicans, looming up over the marshes like Norwegian barks with skysails set. Further up the river Killdeer, Spotted Sandpipers and Black Vultures were extremely common. So were mosquitoes! But it seemed to me that if anything was to be seen in lower Louisiana at all it was sure to be found in terrific abundance, and, given the birds, I was only too glad to let the mosquitoes do the r worst!

March 28, 1918. Anchored off Sabine Pass, Texas. Approximately 500 Blue Geese, (*Chen caerulescens*), in long strings, flew from the wide marshes on shore directly into the Gulf, many passing over the ship. Their flight is quite different from that of Canada Geese, being more like that of the Brant, and even more like the flapping flight of a Heron, though the wing-beats are rapid. Compared to Canada Geese they are poor flyers, with broader, more rounded wings. Birds with white heads were in the minority.

March 29, 1918. *Migrants and waifs at sea.* From Sabine Pass to a point south-east into Gulf of Mexico, 100-150 miles offshore. A "norther," with terrific wind and rain. Three Great Blue Herons, (probably Ward's), lit on the main and foremasts, and stayed there all day, balancing

themselves against our 42 degree roll by half extending and lowering their wings to meet the motion. Among other strange visitors at a distance of 125 miles from land were a belted Kingfisher, several Tree Swallows, and many flocks of warblers, which seemed better able to weather the storm than the huge Herons. The only Warblers identified were Myrtles, Parulas, Redstarts, and a female Black-throated Blue. Three Robins came aboard in the evening.

March 30, 1918. Gulf of Mexico, en route to Tampa, Fla. Very heavy weather, with violent squalls, wind varying in direction. A Henslow's Sparrow stayed with us all day, very tame, and ate crumbled hard-tack and drank rain water from the boat-covers. Passed five Louisiana Herons, making heavy weather of it.

March 31, 1918. About 85-95 miles off entrance of Tampa Bay. Several Myrtles, a Parula, a Black and White, and one Prothonotary Warbler flew aboard and spent the morning on the boat-deck, all very tame. Strangely enough, the Myrtles ate bread-crumbs and crumbled hard-tack thrown to them by compassionate sailors!

VI

MIGRANT JAEGERS IN LAST OF MARCH AND EARLY APRIL.

March 14, Bound north. About 180 miles off the west coast of Florida, somewhere between Ft. Myers and Tampa; four Pomarine Jaegers followed us most of the day, the only birds seen with the exception of six or eight Herring Gulls and the Phalaropes mentioned elsewhere.

March 31, to April 10. Cruising in Gulf of Mexico, from Tampa to Key West; and from Key West northwards up the east coast of Florida, rather close inshore (fifteen to twenty-five miles off). During this time a few Jaegers were seen every day, numbers being nearly equally divided between the Pomarine and Parasitic species. One or more Long-tailed Jaegers were definitely identified, and two or three doubtful individuals seen at too long range. This latter species, April 8, between Alligator Shoals and St. Lucie inlet. On April 9, approaching Jacksonville, eight or ten Pomarine and about five Parasitic Jaegers followed us northward all day, even up the St. John's river as far as Mayport. According to Cooke practically nothing is known of the northward migration of the Jaegers, and the above notes may be of additional interest on this account.²

774 *Madison Ave., New York, N. Y.*

²Cooke, W. W., 1915. Distribution and migration North Am. Gulls—and their allies: Bull. no. 292 U. S. Dept. Agr.